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SUBJECT: BENIN: AF A/S CARSON AND FOREIGN MINISTER STRESS BILATERAL  
PARTNERSHIP

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: On February 5, 2010, Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Johnnie Carson met Benin's Minister of Foreign Affairs Jean-Marie Ehouzou in Cotonou. The meeting was very cordial, and focused on shared values and shared commitment to democracy and development. A/S Carson announced a USG contribution of USD 100,000 towards the implementation of Benin's computerized electoral list in preparation for presidential and legislative elections in 2011. END SUMMARY.

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SHARED COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY . . .  
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¶2. (U) A/S Carson opened the meeting by affirming that relations between Washington and Cotonou are excellent and based on shared values -- with democracy as the core principle. He commended the Government of Benin (GOB) and its leaders, past and present, for the strong democracy established in Benin over the last two decades, and for its succession of free and fair elections.

¶3. (U) A/S Carson emphasized that democratic practices lead to greater development, which the U.S. is proud to support. He said the U.S. is confident that the more than USD 300 mn the U.S. has invested in Benin through its Millennium Challenge Compact is used well. A/S Carson expressed pride in other U.S. development programs and the work of more than 100 Peace Corps volunteers in Benin. A/S Carson lauded Benin's efforts to combat narcotics trafficking in the region and its contributions to international peacekeeping missions.

¶4. (SBU) In support of Benin's efforts to implement the Permanent Digital Electoral List (LEPI), A/S Carson pledged a USG contribution of USD 100,000 towards its implementation. He added that Benin is an example to other countries that shows what progress can be made in democracy and development. He acknowledged that in these regards Benin is ahead of Nigeria, Ghana, and other states in the region.

¶5. (U) FM Ehouzou gratefully acknowledged the USG contribution to the LEPI budget as a fitting legacy of A/S Carson's visit, and expressed certainty that this gesture will encourage wider support from the international community for LEPI. He noted that Benin's LEPI is currently being energetically debated, but pointed out that that such discussion of an innovative system is part of democracy.

¶6. (U) FM Ehouzou observed that February 2010 marks the 20th anniversary of democracy in Benin. On February 18, 1990, President Kerekou called a National Convention on the future of Benin when riots broke out after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Ehouzou commended Kerekou for choosing democracy instead of authoritarian tactics to curb civil unrest. While admitting some regret that Benin had not been on the agenda, FM Ehouzou indicated his satisfaction with President Obama's visit to Ghana last year, since President Obama showed support for all African democracies by this visit.

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. . . ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP . . .  
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¶7. (U) FM Ehouzou expressed appreciation for USG support for Benin's development, and highlighted the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) role in strengthening the Port of Cotonou, the core of Benin's economy. He pledged that he will assure that the

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current MCC Compact is successfully completed, and underscored the GOB's hope for a second MCC Compact. FM Ehouzou stressed the importance of economic development to sustain democracy, since a democracy with no resources is a weak democracy.

¶8. (U) FM Ehouzou noted that Benin has not yet mobilized benefits offered by the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), since Benin does not have capacity to produce goods for the U.S. market. While Benin produces cotton, there is little processing capability in Benin, so only raw cotton is sold. FM Ehouzou requested support for Benin's textile industry so that Benin can produce fabric, create employment opportunities, and participate in the international fabric trade. FM Ehouzou pledged that the GOB will ensure good management of USG development support. As a specific example, the GOB will assure that items such as insecticide-treated mosquito nets (a significant component of Benin's President's Malaria Initiative program) reach the poorest citizens who need them most.

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. . . AND PARTNERS AT THE UN  
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¶9. (U) Foreign Minister Ehouzou commended the USG for its work toward international peace. As Benin's former Ambassador to the United Nations, he affirmed that the two Missions enjoy a partnership. As Foreign Minister, he has instructed Benin's current UN Ambassador to continue his practice of sharing Benin's position and consulting with the USG prior to any sensitive vote.

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SHARED CONCERNS FOR HAITI  
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¶10. (U) The Foreign Minister then addressed the devastation wrought by the recent earthquake in Haiti, noting the strong historical and ongoing cultural and social ties between Benin and Haiti. Immediately after the earthquake, President Yayi summoned the diplomatic corps to highlight the close relationship between Benin and Haiti and GOB concern that Haiti's humanitarian needs be urgently addressed.

¶11. (U) FM Ehouzou commended the USG for its rapid response to Haiti's catastrophe and emphasized the GOB's gratitude for U.S. generosity in this crisis. He pointed out that the GOB has proposed a program to the UN to support Haitian university students' education by placing them in Benin's universities while Haiti's educational infrastructure is rebuilt. He also noted that Benin lost three members of its United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) contingent in the earthquake.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT. A/S Carson's commitment to support LEPI was especially welcome news for FM Ehouzou and the GOB; the USG had been the sole major donor among Western democracies not to support LEPI, and USG endorsement in this fashion is critical for LEPI credibility in the GOB view. Similarly, the GOB's commitment to complete success of its MCC Compact and its hope for a follow-on Compact demonstrate the leverage and influence the USG currently enjoys -- leverage which will support our efforts to encourage and facilitate sound Presidential and legislative elections in 2011.  
END COMMENT.

¶13. (U) A/S Carson has cleared this message.  
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